

Inspection report for Four Ways Children's Centre

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| Local authority | St Helens |
| Inspection number | 362481 |
| Inspection dates | 12-13 October 2010 |
| Reporting inspector | Linda McLarty HMI |

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| Centre governance | St Helens Council. |
| Centre leader | Carmel Salem |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected. |
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| Linked school if applicable | |
| Linked early years and childcare, if applicable | Sure Start Fourways Children's Centre EY297833 |

The inspection of this Sure Start Children's Centre was carried out under Part 3A of the Childcare Act 2006 as inserted by section 199 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

Introduction

The inspection addresses the centre's contribution to:

- facilitating access to early childhood services by parents, prospective parents and young children
- maximising the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children
- improving the well-being of young children.

The report is made to the local authority and a copy is sent to the children's centre. The local authority may send the report to such persons it considers appropriate and must arrange for an action plan to be produced in relation to the findings in this report.

An inspection of the registered early years/childcare provision was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the centre under Sections 49 and 50 of the Childcare Act 2006. The report of this inspection is available on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an early years inspector.

The inspectors held meetings with local authority representatives, centre leadership and management, partnership representatives, parents and staff.

They observed the centre's work, and looked at a range of relevant documentation.

Information about the centre

Four Ways Children's Centre is managed by St Helens local authority. It is situated within two 'Super Output Areas' on the Four Acre estate. Approximately 400 of the 666 children in the reach area live in one of the 30% most deprived areas in the country, with the others living in one of the 70% most deprived areas. The centre serves a very mixed community with some significant pockets of affluence and yet overall the area is one of 33.4 % worklessness and is situated in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods nationally. One ward, Bold, is in the top 1% of disadvantaged areas nationally. Over 38% of all children in the reach area live in households dependent upon workless benefits. Almost all families are of White British heritage with less than 1% of families from a variety of black or minority ethnic groups.

Four Ways Children's Centre is a Phase 1 centre which has been offering the full core offer of integrated childcare and early learning, health, family support and outreach and links to Jobcentre Plus since 1 January 2005. The current acting manager has been in post since February 2010 on a temporary contract during a period of

reorganisation of the Children's Centres in St. Helens.

Local authority leadership and governance are provided at partnership, area board and advisory board levels.

The centre shares a site with Four Acre Health Clinic, near to a local Catholic primary school, library and shopping area. It provides a base for a range of services on-site including outreach and family services. The majority of child and family services are delivered from the centre, with adult and training services delivered from the local primary school. The centre includes Sure Start Four Ways Children's Centre Nursery, and the nursery and day care provision have been subject to their own inspection. The inspection report can be found at www.Ofsted.gov.uk. The children's centre also offers crèche provision for parents accessing courses. Children enter local nurseries and most local schools with skills and abilities much lower than those of their peers nationally especially in communication and social skills.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

The effectiveness of the children's centre in meeting the needs of and improving outcomes for users and the wider community

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

The centre's capacity for sustained improvement, including the quality of its leadership and management

3

Main findings

Overall, the centre provides satisfactorily for the needs of its reach area. The local authority has not always provided sufficient strategic direction and support. The centre did not receive any guidance as to the local targets, which affected the precision of its own target-setting and success criteria. Historically, there is a legacy of staff shortage and the current situation, where the centre manager is also managing the day care, also limits the centre's capacity to improve. The centre cannot produce sufficient evidence of its performance over time as the local authority has not requested and supported the acquisition of this information, and systems to gather evidence of impact are still developing.

Outcomes, provision and leadership and management are satisfactory. Parents appreciate the centre's activities to help them keep healthy, such as the family cooking sessions where they make wholesome milkshakes with their children. The lack of timely information from health service partners about pregnancies and new births limits how promptly the centre can visit to offer breastfeeding and other

support. Information about national indicator health targets has not been forthcoming and the health representation on the advisory board and recent involvement in the work of the centre has been uneven.

The centre provides a safe environment and safeguarding procedures are satisfactory. Work with key agencies ensures that children are safeguarded, protected and their welfare concerns are identified and supported satisfactorily.

The on-site day care is providing children with a good start in life. The centre encourages parents to participate in activities, building their confidence to apply for other courses which has led to increased opportunities to volunteer, for example in the production of the 'Flutterbye' newsletter, or in the stay and play sessions. This has sometimes led to full and part-time employment thus improving the life chances of the registered families.

Provision is integrated and satisfactory. Assessment of the needs of children and their families on-site following activities is satisfactory, but wider assessment is hampered by lack of information from the local authority and the health service. The centre is promoting satisfactory learning, development and enjoyment for most of its users. Strong partnership working with Jobcentre Plus is helping to promote increased financial independence.

The range of services is adequate but is restricted by the ongoing and historical staff shortages.

Care, guidance and support are good. Parents describe the support they receive as 'life changing', saying, 'I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the children's centre.' The centre can point to many examples of successful outcomes for the most vulnerable families, some of whom receive many years of intervention and support.

The leadership and management of the setting are satisfactory. The recently appointed acting manager has had insufficient time to embed her vision for improvement and her improvement activity is also restricted by the recent amalgamation of the roles of centre manager with day-care manager.

There are clear lines of accountability between the Local Strategic Partnership, the Children's Trust, Think Family and the children's centre. Governance is satisfactory, but the ability to hold the centre to account is reduced because the local authority has not yet shared its local targets with the children's centre. The strength of the advisory board lies in the high percentage of committed local parent representation, although some of the other partnership representatives do not attend meetings consistently which restricts the information exchange and timeliness of decision making.

The centre promotes equal access to its services adequately, with particularly strong support given to the most vulnerable groups to enable the centre to begin to narrow the gap caused by disadvantage. Systems to evaluate the impact of the centre's

services are still developing and do not yet provide convincing evidence of impact. Good engagement with centre users is a strength and staff are skilled at welcoming and retaining parental engagement and encouraging parents to contribute to the shaping of services.

What does the centre need to do to improve further?

Recommendations for further improvement

- Improve the strategic impact of the local authority in the governance of the centre by improving the quality of the information shared about the centre's reach area, the local authority targets and the centre's expected contribution towards these.
- Improve the way the children's centre demonstrates how the service it provides meets the needs of the reach area.
- Strengthen the governance of the children's centre by improving how the partnership representation on the advisory board holds the children's centre to account and offers appropriate support and challenge.
- Ensure that health service partners routinely provide timely information about pregnancies and births in order that the children's centre can register all new births within one week and offer appropriate breast feeding and other support.

How good are outcomes for users?

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Initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles are limited by the size of the staff team and by lack of information from, and contact with, wider health services, despite the close proximity of the adjacent health centre. For example, midwives are able to signpost mothers to the centre but do not have the capacity to follow up and see who has registered. There has been no health coordinator for two years, which has hindered effective information exchange with the health visitor team, so the centre does not always have sufficient information about new births, which compromises both the support for breast feeding mothers and the implementation of the universal contact service.

The staff have forged effective relationships with parents and children, with a strong focus on ensuring that the most vulnerable children are well provided for. The use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) results in prompt support which often negates the need for higher level social care intervention. Children on the Children in Need register or who have a child protection plan are monitored and supported satisfactorily.

The arrangements for supervised access, where meetings are sometimes held in public areas, are insufficiently confidential and do not foster positive interactions between participants. Many parents express strong appreciation for the centre's work particularly for the support they receive in times of crisis and particular difficulty.

Staff also signpost parents to the most appropriate services to support their needs effectively. 'I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the children's centre', said one parent.

Recent inspection reports for receiver schools indicate that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage make generally good progress from low starting points in the Nursery, pre-school and Reception class settings throughout the area. However, their achievements in receiver schools, as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, show that less than half of the reach area children achieve as well as their peers nationally.

The centre provides courses to help families to promote positive behaviour but systems to help those with communication difficulties express their needs and preferences are at an early stage.

Parental involvement is fostered well by the centre with 50% parental representation at advisory board level. Jobcentre Plus hold a weekly session at the centre which is helping parents to seek advice about the government incentives available to encourage the take-up of employment. Courses are provided at various venues to improve literacy and numeracy, thus raising aspirations, and some parents successfully make the transition from volunteer to employee with help from the centre and its partner agencies. This promotes positive outcomes in community involvement as well as laying firm financial foundations for a more independent future.

These are the grades for the outcomes for users

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| The extent to which children, including those from vulnerable groups, are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy and families have healthy lifestyles | 3 |
| The extent to which children are safe and protected, their welfare concerns are identified and appropriate steps taken to address them | 3 |
| The extent to which all users enjoy and achieve educationally and in their personal and social development | 3 |
| The extent to which children engage in positive behaviour and develop positive relationships and users contribute to decision making and governance of the centre | 3 |
| The extent to which children are developing skills for the future and parents are developing economic stability and independence including access to training | 3 |

How good is the provision?

3

Provision for children attending the on-site day care setting is good. Provision for users in general is satisfactory and limited by the amount of accurate information

about the profile of the residents in the area provided by the local authority, partnership with health services, and staffing shortages. These limit the range of activities which are offered or sustained.

The efforts made to gauge parental satisfaction with services offered is adequate. In the past, use was made of the 'Mosaic' system to assess children's preferences though this is now discontinued.

The partnership with adult community learning is providing satisfactory opportunities for adults to re-engage with learning and training. Although evidence to support this is not gathered systematically, case studies and discussion indicate that for some parents this is a successful route into economic independence.

Care, guidance and support are good, and sensitive outreach work quickly identifies and supports individual family needs. Discussions and case studies reveal many inspiring examples of intensive support by caring and skilled staff, for example outreach visits, respite care, accompanying residents to hospital and facilitating study support in the evenings. This has enabled some families to continue to care for their own children, grow in confidence and gain qualifications and employment. All users spoken to praised the centre staff highly and were greatly appreciative of their work in the community.

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| The effectiveness of the assessment of the needs of children, parents and other users | 3 |
| The extent to which the centre promotes purposeful learning, development and enjoyment for all users | 3 |
| The extent to which the range of services, activities and opportunities meet the needs of users and the wider community | 3 |
| The quality of care, guidance and support offered to users within the centre and the wider community | 2 |

How effective are the leadership and management?

3

Governance is satisfactory but sporadic attendance by some partners on the advisory board reduces their ability to support, challenge and hold the centre's management to account. The local authority has recently improved its processes for providing the data needed to gather, analyse and evaluate performance across a range of national indicators. This is not yet complete and several indicators are unavailable. The centre has not yet been made aware of the local targets. This reduces the rigour of any evaluation of the centre's performance and limits the accuracy of the centre's own target-setting. The improvement plans show that sometimes the success criteria are too vague to enable the centre to evaluate its progress towards the targets. The centre's effectiveness demonstrates satisfactory use of resources including its staff.

The acting manager has not been in post long enough for the results of her improvements to be clearly demonstrated but she has strengthened the staff team. Her passion for the work is evident and she has motivated those staff who were slightly reluctant to provide services out of centre to do so, thus increasing the access for harder to reach families.

The limited information exchange between the health services restricts the centre's ability to improve health outcomes as the centre does not receive sufficient timely information to inform its service delivery. For example, the centre does not receive information about how many visits to Accident and Emergency departments are made by children in its reach area and therefore can not monitor the impact of its work in promoting safety. The centre has limited access to pregnant mothers at the ante-natal clinic and therefore, this potentially vulnerable group has to seek support from the centre independently.

Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory and the centre manager monitors the support for Children in Need and those on with Child Protection plans.

The centre promotes equality satisfactorily. Local awareness of the wider community is promoted by activities such as visits by an Indian dancer, or activities based around Chinese New Year. Data show that in the last year the gap between the lowest achieving 20% of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and their peers nationally narrowed from 34% to 26%.

Partnership working is effective at the practice level, but less so in the strategic governance. Parents are the strongest element in the advisory board and express some dissatisfaction that their commitment as volunteers is not matched by their professional colleagues who are paid to attend meetings. This can delay decision making and limits the way the management is held to account, supported and challenged.

Staff foster community and user engagement well. The Family Matters parents group is instrumental in fund-raising and also in supporting the work of the centre. Many of its members go on to represent the wider community on the advisory board. They receive training in committee skills to support these roles. As there is currently only one childminder registered in the reach area, childminders are signposted to the nearest childminder network.

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| The extent to which governance, accountability, professional supervision and day-to-day management arrangements are clear and understood | 3 |
| The extent to which ambitious targets drive improvement, provision is integrated and there are high expectations for users and the wider community | 3 |

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| The extent to which resources are used and managed efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of users and the wider community | 3 |
| The extent to which equality is promoted and diversity celebrated, illegal or unlawful discrimination is tackled and the centre fulfils its statutory duties | 3 |
| The effectiveness of the centre's policy, procedures and work with key agencies in safeguarding children and, where applicable, vulnerable adults | 3 |
| The extent to which evaluation is used to shape and improve services and activities | 3 |
| The extent to which partnerships with other agencies ensure the integrated delivery of the range of services the centre has been commissioned to provide | 3 |
| The extent to which the centre supports and encourages the wider community to engage with services and uses their views to develop the range of provision | 2 |

Any other information used to inform the judgements made during this inspection

The on-site childcare was inspected on 07 October 2010 and the overall effectiveness was judged to be good. The full report can be found on Ofsted's website www.Ofsted.gov.uk.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like us to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Summary for centre users

We inspected the Four Ways Children's Centre on 12 and 13 October 2010.

We judged the centre to be satisfactory overall.

Thank you for the way you helped us reach these decisions by talking to us and allowing us to observe activities and visits. The centre is helping you to stay safe and healthy, and to provide for your families satisfactorily. Staff are especially good at making people feel valued and encouraging parents to come to courses which raise self-esteem, help with parenting and other skills and increase parents' confidence. The Family Matters parents' group is a good example of how parents take on voluntary roles such as treasurer which can give them the confidence and skills to join the advisory board, or to seek further education or training which can help them to gain full or part-time employment. Parents make an extremely strong contribution to the success of the centre and make up 50% of the advisory board. They are encouraged to volunteer to help lead some groups, access training then take over leading. Attendance at a creative writing course led some parents to become involved in writing and distributing the 'Flutterbyes' newspaper. The childcare and crèche arrangements care well for children and give them a good start to their early education.

Parents gave inspectors many examples of life-changing help by Four Ways staff and inspectors saw for themselves how skilled staff are at supporting people with a wide range of sometimes very complex needs. They offer practical help and support and parents appreciate the way the outreach visits, and making friends at groups, has reduced their sense of isolation. Staff are skilled at helping parents access the right services to improve their life chances.

The centre staff and their partner agencies have provided families with a satisfactory range of services but an extended period of staff shortages have limited what can be provided and how often. Parents appreciate the activities such as baby 'Peeps', stay and play sessions and behaviour management courses. The current arrangements where the acting centre manager is managing both the centre and the day care makes it difficult for her to carry out the many improvements she wishes to bring to the centre's services.

We think that families could receive even more help if the local authority helped the centre to know its area better, and gave it clear guidance on what the targets are. The centre is just starting to provide evidence of its impact and at the moment this information is often not detailed enough to show how it helps the authority meet the national targets or how well it is succeeding in meeting its own targets. This makes it difficult for the centre's leaders and managers to prove how effective the Four Ways centre is.

We think that the poor quality of the relationship with the health service is not helping the centre enough to meet the local needs. One example is that information about pregnancies and births is not shared early enough for the centre to give new mothers breast feeding and other support. The health services, along with some other professional partners, do not attend the advisory board often enough to support and challenge the centre as much as they should.

We have asked the local authority to improve the quality of the information they give the centre about the area, and about the centre's expected contribution to the way the authority meets the national targets. We asked the centre to improve the way it can show how well its work meets the needs of its area. We asked the health service partners to routinely share information on pregnancies and births to enable the centre to visit within one week of birth. We asked the advisory board partners to improve the way they challenge and support the centre's work.

The full report is available from your centre or on our website www.ofsted.gov.uk.